

February 22, 2014

Judiciary Committee
Connecticut General Assembly
Hartford CT 06106

**RE: Testimony in Support for Sections 8 and 9 of Raised Bill No. 155, An Act
Concerning Probate Courts**

Dear Members of the Judiciary Committee:

I am submitting this testimony in support of Sections 8 and 9 of Raised Bill No. 155, An Act Concerning Probate Courts. My name is Ellen Messali and I am a Staff Attorney for the International Institute of Connecticut, Inc., a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to the needs of immigrants, refugees and foreign born victims of serious crimes. Collectively, its programs aim to help low-income families become self-sufficient and integrated, and include refugee resettlement, language services, job assistance, educational programming as well as legal immigration assistance.

The Institute maintains a special status given by the Justice Department called BIA recognition, which allows charitable organizations to practice immigration law by way of both attorneys and non-attorneys. With BIA recognition, an agency such as the Institute may then apply for their staff members to become Accredited Representatives, provided that they demonstrate an advanced knowledge in immigration proceedings.

Since 1918, the Institute has assisted thousands of Connecticut's newest Americans with their immigration needs, helping them to become U.S. Citizens, be reunited with family members, and receive relief when victimized by the likes of political persecution, human trafficking, and sexual assault. The clients we see are hardworking, contributing members of our communities, who are transitioning to life in the United States, and often face many barriers on their journeys to gaining legal status in this country. Not surprisingly, these barriers can be especially overwhelming for our minor clients.

Over the past several years, the International Institute has seen an increase in the number of minors who come to the Institute seeking immigration legal assistance. Sadly, many of these children have experienced abuse, neglect, or abandonment by one or both of their parents. For instance, David¹, who sought court representation from the International Institute last year, grew up in a household where he was beaten and strangled by his mother on a regular basis. He still has several scars on his body as a living memorial of the abuse that he suffered. Fortunately, after arriving in the United States, a probate court granted guardianship of David to his aunt, and made the findings necessary to allow him to apply for Special Immigration Juvenile Status (SIJS). This status gives David the opportunity to apply for permanent residence in this country, something that will forever change his life for the better, and prevent him from being returned to the home where he was so brutally abused.

¹ Name substituted to protect the client's identity.

This opportunity is something that all children who have experienced abuse, neglect, or abandonment deserve to have, and Sections 8 and 9 of SB No. 155 brings Connecticut much closer to ensuring this right. These sections do so by confirming that children who are currently in probate court, or those who are already subject to a probate court order, have the opportunity to file a motion with the court asking it to make the findings necessary to apply for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status. Further, these sections will guarantee that the language used in probate court orders comports with SIJS federal law requirements, thus avoiding harmful delays in obtaining immigration benefits.

As an attorney who practices exclusively in the state of Connecticut, I can attest to the fact that obtaining Special Immigrant Juvenile Status for my clients is currently a very challenging process, and one that many do not know how to navigate. The current barriers to obtaining SIJS protection have resulted in its lack of use by children who truly need it. By passing this legislation, Connecticut would be eliminating unnecessary barriers to gaining access to Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, the process of which it is already difficult for children to avail themselves.

On behalf of the International Institute and the thousands of newcomers we serve each year, I thank you for your time and for your efforts to protect the children of Connecticut.

Respectfully Submitted,

Ellen Messali, Esq.
Staff Attorney